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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001349

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KWMN](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)

SUBJECT: NEW INFORMATION MINISTER HAILED BY LIBERALS,
PLEDGES TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S POLITICAL RIGHTS

REF: A. KUWAIT 1200

[B](#). KUWAIT 1091

[C](#). KUWAIT 0036

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Moving to fill cabinet vacancies in the run-up to an expected Parliamentary vote on women's rights, the GOK announced March 31 it had chosen Dr. Anas Mohammed Al-Rasheed, sworn in on April 4, as its new Information Minister. A professor and former editorial adviser to local Arabic daily Al-Qabas, the U.S.-educated Al-Rasheed reportedly pledged his support for women's rights as a condition of his appointment. The choice of Al-Rasheed to fill the position vacated by former Minister Mohammed Abulhassan has taken on additional significance as the Government attempts to shore up votes in the National Assembly and among its own members for an expected GOK-Islamist showdown on political rights for women. End Summary.

New Minister Hailed by Liberals

[1](#)2. (U) The announcement of Dr. Anas Mohammed Al-Rasheed as Kuwait's new Information Minister on March 31 was hailed by most of Kuwait's liberal establishment as a step in the right direction. Despite their concerns about Al-Rasheed's ability to manage a Ministry widely believed to be split along Islamist-Progressive lines, liberal columnists praised the government's choice of a moderate "media man" for the job. Writing in the April 1 edition of local Arabic daily Al-Watan, columnist Jamal Al-Kandari said Al-Rasheed was known "as a reputable independent, straightforward and religious man." Al Seyasseh columnist and Secretary General of Kuwait Journalists' Association Faisal Al Qanai echoed these thoughts on April 2, "For the first time we have Minister that is one of us. The appointment of a university professor and an expert in media and press to the position of Minister of Information is a positive step, and promises a good future for our profession."

Veiled Threats from Islamists

[1](#)3. (C) The response from conservatives was considerably less enthusiastic. Mindful of their role in the downfall of ousted Shiite Information Minister Mohammed Abulhassan (Ref. c), conservatives sent subtle yet strong reminders to the new Minister that they would be watching his actions very closely. Islamist MP Faisal Al-Mislim told reporters on April 2 that while he believed Al-Rasheed was qualified for the position, he was hopeful that the new Minister would "stay out of conflicts between (political) currents." He urged Al-Rasheed to allow senior Ministry officials more influence in the Ministry's decisions, to closely monitor the content of books being sold in the country and to "keep an eye on concerts, including the so-called private concerts which are organized without license." (Note: Al-Rasheed's predecessor had been accused of freezing senior Islamists out of the decision-making process and was grilled over his decision to permit concerts and the sale of books deemed offensive by many Islamists. End Note.)

Al-Rasheed Pledged Support for Women's Rights

[1](#)4. (C) The appointment of the Minister comes as debate in the country over the issue of women's rights has reached a high point, pitting the credibility of the Government against the power of Islamists. With Justice Minister Ahmed Bager expected to vote against the extension of the franchise, the Government appears to be taking steps to shore up its ranks. Al-Rai Al-Aam Managing Editor Ali Al-Ruz told Press Officer April 2 that Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah made Al-Rasheed pledge his support for women's political rights before moving forward with the appointment.

A Reputation for Staying in the Middle

[1](#)5. (C) Al-Rasheed is known as a mild-mannered academic and is not expected to move forcefully against Islamists.

Liberals have approved of the appointment, but some contacts have suggested that Al-Rasheed's views lean more toward the Islamist camp. Nevertheless, according to Al-Rai Al-Aam Managing Editor Ali Al-Ruz, "He is the right man to hold the stick in the middle." The new Minister is reportedly beholden to National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi for both his previous job as editorial advisor to Al-Qabas and his new appointment, and will not jeopardize this relationship by confronting Al-Khorafi's Islamist allies. Describing the relationship between Al-Khorafi and Al-Rasheed, Al Qabas chief of local news Adnan Qaqoon -- a self-described close friend of Al-Rasheed -- was blunt: "He belongs to Al-Khorafi."

But Can He Manage the Ministry?

16. (C) While Al-Rasheed's appointment was publicly hailed by his colleagues in academia and the media, the same contacts privately expressed sympathy for him and cast doubts about his ability to affect change, as well as his independence. Al-Ruz, a close friend, described him as a "theoretical" man, unable to apply down-to-earth know-how to his administrative challenges. Qaqoon bemoaned the balkanization of the ministry, and predicted that much of the new minister's time would be spent putting out fires between Islamist and progressive ministry factions. A third senior editor who closely follows press and parliamentary issues lamented, "He is a typical Kuwaiti...he will want to please Shaykh Sabah, the Islamists, and the Liberals. The best he can do is keep the situation in Kuwait the way it is, and he won't have much of an effect on it."

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